

David May's Row  
217-223 High Street  
Petersburg  
Virginia

HABS NO. VA-660

HABS  
VA  
27-PET,  
32-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

## DAVID MAY'S ROW

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VA  
27-PET,  
32-

Location: 217-223 High Street, Petersburg, Virginia

Present Owner: Louis S. Absalon (217) (219)  
Rt. 6, Box 398  
Petersburg, Virginia

Nick G. and Mary Nicholas (223)  
1821 Westover Avenue  
Petersburg, Virginia

Present Occupant: Unoccupied

Present Use: Vacant, were private residences

Statement of Significance: These four elegant Victorian row houses were built c. 1859-1860 and should be noted for their bracketed cornices and classical revival porches.

PART 1. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: c. 1859-1860. (Landbook 1859 and 1860, Handwritten bound manuscripts in the Clerk's Office of Hustings Court, Petersburg, Virginia.)
2. Architect: Unknown.
3. Original and subsequent owners: A complete chain of title for the house at 217 High Street follows. Deed and Will Books are in the Clerk's Office of Hustings Court at Petersburg.

1867 Deed December 5, 1867 recorded in  
Will Book 5 page 546  
David May  
to  
Anna M. (May) Baker

1872 Deed October 1, 1872 recorded in  
Book 34 page 558  
R. H. Baker  
Anna M. Baker  
to  
David Steele

1872 Deed September 17, 1872 recorded in  
Will Book 7 page 128  
David Steele  
to  
Adeline M. Steele

- 1912 Deed April 17, 1912 recorded in  
Book 84 page 507  
Adeline M. Steele  
to  
John J. Hanrahan
- 1914 Deed November 19, 1914 recorded in  
Book 84 page 507  
John J. Hanrahan  
Mary Collins Hanrahan  
to  
W. H. Stewart
- 1925 Deed June 22, 1925 recorded in  
Will Book 13 page 210  
William H. Stewart  
to  
Benjamin F. Stewart
- 1939 Deed September 18, 1939 recorded in  
Book 139 page 97  
Benjamin F. Stewart  
Annie H. Stewart  
to  
Robert M. Friend
- 1963 Deed December 10, 1963 recorded in  
Book 261 page 403  
Robert M. Friend  
Florence W. Friend  
to  
Louis S. Absalon

4. Original plans and construction: Unknown.
5. Alterations and additions: Unknown.
6. Important old views: A water color sketch of William Skinner Simpson, Jr. in the collection of the Fort Henry Branch (Petersburg) of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (c. 1870). This is reproduced in the HABS collection.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

The following account is taken directly from James H. Bailey, "May's Row Is Associated With Name of Petersburg Artist," The Progress-Index, Petersburg, August 25, 1957, p. 11, c.1.

"May's Row", the four ante-bellum High Street houses situated immediately at the west of 'Smith's Row', is perhaps most strikingly associated with the name of William Skinner Simpson, Jr., the Petersburg artist whose pictures in delicate

water color and whose deft crayon drawings are today collectors' items.

"Simpson was born on December 1, 1823 on then fashionable Bollingbrook Street, but from 1867 (at the latest) until his death on August 9, 1895, he resided at No. 2 'May's Row' (219 High Street), a house which bears the scar left by a shell fired during the Siege of Petersburg. Some of the city's older inhabitants remember Simpson as a Confederate veteran who was largely instrumental in the establishment of the 'soldiers' section in Blandford Cemetery (the present memorial arch bears a tablet to his memory, or as a vestryman (as was his father before him) of Saint Paul's Episcopal Church; many more citizens not so old well recall his eldest daughter, the beloved Miss Mary Lochhead Simpson, long organist of Saint Paul's and music teacher.

"Simpson's father, the elder William, was a native Englishman of Scotch descent, and he too had a well-known artist of his day. Frequently it is difficult and, sometimes, impossible for a critic to differentiate the work of the son from that of the parent. Both delighted to capture upon the pages of their sketch books familiar scenes around this community and area, little vignettes which are valuable not only for their intrinsic artistic merit but also for their evocating of the vanished face of a nineteenth century Southern town.

"The largest collection of sketches by both Simpsons is in the possession of Young's Art Galley of Richmond. (This is no longer true). Photographs of these are in the Alderman Library of the University of Virginia. There are however some fortunate local holders of original original Simpsons. Among these are Saint Paul's Episcopal and Tabb Street Presbyterian Churches, the City School Board, whose two scenes of downtown Petersburg hang in the office of the Superintendent of Schools, and the owners of "Battersea", "Ellerslie", and "Stirling Castle", who have the sketches of their historic houses. A Simpson brush also caught Old Blandford Church, the Exchange Building, the old Library Hall, and the law office of the first George Strother Bernard in which the younger Simpson, a notary, kept his desk.

"Among the prominent occupants of N. 2 "May's Row" prior to William S. Simpson Jr., and his family were Colonel John Augustine Peterson, Mr. and Mrs. Ezekiel Myers, Mrs. Jane Catherine VanCourtlandt, and Miss Susan Harrison Devereux.

"Colonel Peterson, whose country seat was "Spring Garden", Prince George, practiced law both in that county and at Petersburg. He served as president of the City Point Railroad and as senior warden of Saint John's Episcopal Church,

City Point. He was twice married: first, to Miss Virginia Anne Thweatt and, secondly, to her cousin, Miss Eliza Thweatt. By the first marriage he was the father of John Augustine Peterson Jr., who resided at No. 1 "May's Row" (217 High St.) in the years following the War Between the States, and of Virginia Anne Thweatt Peterson who was married to Nathaniel Cocke of Prince George. The latter couple were the paternal grandparents of Mrs. Alexander Donnan Hamilton. Miss Mabel Epes Peterson is the granddaughter of John A. Peterson Jr., by his marriage to Miss Mary Epes, of Prince George. The second wife of Colonel Peterson bore him four children. These were the late Richard Harrison Peterson, the late Mrs. Stark Armistead Plummer (who had been Cornelia Peterson), and the late Misses Mary Frances and Betty Peterson. The last two ladies were associated with "May's Row" throughout the greater part of their lives, and there conducted one of the delightful "pay schools" for younger children which were a pleasant feature of Petersburg life in the last years of the nineteenth century.

"Mrs. Jane VanCourtlandt, who brought to the row one of New York's most patrician names, was the widow of Augustus VanCourtlandt, of Westchester County in that state. She was the daughter of Robert Maitland, of "Goldielea", Dumfries, Scotland, who lived for a brief period in both Petersburg and Norfolk and who died in New York. Robert Maitland was twice married, and both his wives were American. His second wife was Elizabeth Lenox, of New York, a member of the family whose name is perpetuated in Lenox Avenue. His first wife, the mother of Mrs. VanCourtlandt of "May's Row", was Susanna Harrison, niece of Benjamin Harrison of Berkeley, signer of the Declaration of Independence. Miss Susan Devereux, a niece of Mrs. VanCourtlandt and her successor at No. 2 "May's Row", was the only child of Thomas Pollock Devereux, of Raleigh, North Carolina, by his wife who had been Ann Mary Maitland. Miss Devereux was a member of the faculty of the old Southern Female College.

"No. 3 "May's Row" (221 High St.) was for many years the residence of Dr. David F. May, a son of David May, the local attorney who had built the row. Another son of David May was Captain John P. May, Confederate States Army, who was killed in action.

"No. 4 "May's Row" (223 High St.) was in 1860 let to Richard G. Pegram, Commonwealth's Attorney at Petersburg just prior to the War Between the States, who subsequently had a handsome house on Sycamore Street. He was captain of the famous "Pegram's Battery" in the Lee Guard Artillery of the Confederate States Army. His daughters were the late Mrs. Delia Pegram Cameron, of "Mount Erin", site of the present Petersburg General Hospital, and the late Mrs. Jennie Pegram McIntyre of

this city, and the late Mrs. Barton Haxall Grundy, and the late Mrs. Parker T. Conrad, of Richmond. The Richard Pegram Cameron Room of the Petersburg Public Library bears the name of his grandson and namesake.

"Another occupant of "No. 4" was Mrs. Margaret Jackson Robinson, widow of Robert Emmet Robinson, Jr., a grandson of Dr. Thomas Robinson, eminent Petersburg physician of the ante-bellum era and friend of Edgar Allan Poe."

Prepared by Randall J. Biallas  
University of Illinois, Urbana  
August 1968

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This is a four part brick row house built in 1859-1860. It is particularly unusual for its large-scale bracket cornice at the roof line.
2. Condition of fabric: Both interiors and exteriors are in a run-down, dilapidated state.

### B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: This rectangular building is made up of 4 row houses, all joined by party walls. Overall dimensions of the original portions are approximately 105' x 45', with each unit approximately 26' wide. Each unit is three bays and three stories, plus a basement. A relatively new 10' addition has been added to the rear, making the building now approximately 55' deep.
2. Foundations: The basement walls are brick. Below grade was inaccessible.
3. Wall construction: Brick, reddish-brown natural finish (original part). The addition at rear is a combination of wood frame and concrete block construction.
4. Chimneys: There are ten brick chimneys, with two for each unit plus two at the far left end (facing building) where another house was at one time attached. Chimneys are to the right of entry in each unit.
5. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: There are four exterior doors for each unit--one each at front and rear of basement and one

at the front entrance (first floor). In addition there is a peculiar situation with a door at the landing of the stairs to the second floor. At one time a porch probably opened off this landing.

- b. Windows and shutters: The windows of the original portion are all double-hung with six lights each sash. All windows, with the exception of those in the addition, appear to be original. No shutters remain, but holes in the brick where shutter latches were are still visible. Shutters are shown in the c. 1870 water color sketch before mentioned. Window sills have a small lip projection and the lintels of the first and second story windows are in the shape of a shallow pediment (all front exterior windows except those in the basement and third floor, which have simple flat lintels).
- 6. Porches and areaways: Each entry has a small covered porch with moulded cornice at roof line. Porches are supported by two wood columns (one on each side). An areaway along the exterior front wall leads to basement of each building.
- 7. Structural system: Floor joists run between the (brick) bearing party walls on each floor. The roof is flat and slightly sloping with joists running between party walls.
- 8. Roof shape and covering: The roof slopes slightly from front to rear, and has a tin covering. There is a trap door to the roof in the third floor hallway.
- 9. Cornice, eaves: The large bracketed cornice is a striking feature of the building. The cornice and brackets alike are moulded wood, the brackets being ogee curved in shape. As each unit is a different height, due to the slope of the land, the cornice is not continuous, but is separate for each of the four units.

C. Description of Interior:

- 1. Floor plans, general: The building is rectangular in shape and all units are similar in plan. The following description is for one unit (second unit from right end, facing building).
- 2. Floor plans, specific: Rooms on all floors lead off of a hall along the left party wall (facing building). The front entry is to the left of center, with a staircase opposite the entry at the far end of the hallway. The first floor of the original unit has two large rooms of similar size opening off the hallway to the right. These are connected by a large double doorway in the center of the connecting wall. Each room has a fireplace along the party wall

opposite the entries from the hall. An interesting feature of the first floor plan is the curved wall which occurs where the hallway jogs around the staircase, giving a sense of flow to the space in the hall. First floor ceilings are 12' high. The second and third floor plans are similar in that each consists of two rooms off of hall. The size of the rooms is reduced from those on the first floor to allow for closet space between the rooms. On each of these floors there is only a single connecting door instead of double doors between the two rooms, and there is no curve in the hall. The basement also has two rooms off of the hall in the original part. The addition is composed of two to three small rooms on each floor.

3. Stairways: One stairway serves each unit. There is a landing between each floor except on the straight run to the basement. The newel is a simple block type and the railing has no ornamental detail.
4. Flooring: Wood plank flooring is found on all floors, including the basement.
5. Wall and ceiling finish: Wall and ceiling finish on all floors is in poor condition. Basement: Walls and ceilings are painted plaster. First floor: Wallpaper on plaster walls, painted plaster ceilings. Second and third floors: Varies, paint and wallpaper on plaster, painted plaster ceilings. Interior wall construction on all floors is wood stud and wood lath.
6. Doorways and doors: Large, original double doors connect the first floor rooms. All other doors are single. There is no significant trim.
7. Decorative features and trim: The wood mantel in the front room, first floor, has a moulded, arched fireplace opening and flowered detailing near its base.
8. Lighting: Modern.
9. Heating: Fireplaces have, for the most part, been bricked in. Oil stoves or heaters were probably used when the building was last in use.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The building faces south-east on High Street, in a residential area and on the fringe of the downtown commercial area. It is set back 10' from the street. Land directly to the west is vacant and John H. Smith's Row (HABS No. VA-646) butts the other side. There is an alley in the rear.



2. Outbuildings: There is one outbuilding, probably a coach-house. It is two stories, brick with a chimney, and is primarily open on the lower level.
3. Landscaping and walks: There is a sidewalk in front. There is no landscaping, nor any enclosures.

Prepared by John M. McRae  
Project Supervisor  
Historic American  
Buildings Survey  
July 1968

### PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records are part of the documentation made during the 1968 Petersburg Summer Project, undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey in cooperation with The Historic Petersburg Foundation, Inc., with financial assistance from The Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission. During the summer, records were made of twenty-two buildings in the city.

The project was under the general direction of James C. Massey, Chief, Historic American Buildings Survey. Project Supervisor was John M. McRae of the University of Florida. The recording team was composed of Randall J. Biallas, historian (University of Illinois, Urbana), and student assistant architects Michael Hamilton (University of Arizona), Thomas J. Sanford (Washington State University), and Edwin S. Smith, Jr. (Rhode Island School of Design). Photographs were made by George Eisenmann.